

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS DELIVERED BY BROWN UNIVERSITY PRESIDENT

BARNABY C. KEENEY AT OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY JUNE 12, 1959.

Nationally we tend to think of education as a conservative force and, consciously or unconsciously, we try to make it so. In a sense, indeed, it is, for much of education is concerned with the preservation of what is known, with the memory of what is known, and with the passing on of tradition from one generation to another.

Surely one of the major functions of the college and university is to record and to preserve the past, but I mean a conservatism that goes beyond this.

We hear much of education that is designed to be "for" or "against" something, so that education is essentially thought of as an instrument to preserve the present state of affairs or to destroy a state of affairs that one dislikes.

You have certainly heard much of this here: you have heard of education for physical fitness; you have heard of education for democracy, education for citizenship, education for life adjustment, education for national defense, for survival, for Christianity.

You have surely heard of education against materialism, against Communism, against Russia, against alcohol, bedbugs, and a number of other things.

You have doubtless read that privately supported educational institutions are the bulwark of free enterprise, that state supported institutions are socialistic.

This is, of course, sheer nonsense, for no one has ever taken the trouble to demonstrate that more members of the faculties in privately supported institutions are in favor of free enterprise and more members of the faculties of public institutions are against it.

I rather suspect that, if anyone did try to find this out, he would be cruelly disappointed to learn that there is not much difference.

All these educations for and against that are advocated in this country and which flourish in the totalitarian countries where education is tailored to fit the regime and produce supporters for it are education for safeness.

Not long ago one of the men who go around to colleges to interview seniors for employment after graduation was asked how he proceeded with students.

He said that one of the questions he asked was, "What are your goals, what do you want out of life?"

This is one of the answers he got, presumably from a Brown senior, for which I am heartily ashamed:

"Well, I'd like a nice wife, a couple of kids, a home in Westchester, or, somewhere around New York, maybe in Rye or Scarsdale. They have good schools.

Then I'd like to join the country club and be able to play golf or tennis on weekends.

I don't know about becoming a millionaire, but I want to be comfortable."



The recruiter is said to have nodded understandingly and explained to the student, that, while he might never see Westchester, "You'll find that there are places like Westchester around every good-sized city in the country." God help us -- he is right!

And God save us -- most of the people who live there don't have ambitions much higher than this student's! This boy has spent four years reading the great poets, studying the history of great men, learning something about the frontiers of science, but for him the poet did not sing, the hero did not fight and die, nor did the philosopher aspire to understand what can never be touched.

All he wants is a split-level and 18 holes of golf every Sunday.

These are nice things, but not first things.

Much of what we speak of as education when we speak, for example, of "education for democracy" is not education at all, it is indoctrination.

Just as the Communists indoctrinate their youth to believe in Communism and not to question the accepted tenets of Communism, so would we seek to indoctrinate our youth to accept our system, lumping together with democracy a lot of things that have nothing to do with it. Some of the things we call "education" are training. What we call "education for national defense," for example, is training -- training to be a foot soldier, training to be a pilot, training to be a designer of a rocket.

Each of these tasks requires a different level of education before it can be accomplished, but what is actually done for the direct purpose is not education at all, but training.

Naturally, none of these tasks can be accomplished without a sufficiency of well-educated men for each; my point is that they must be educated to the level, but not to the task.

Many people seem to assume that the purpose of education is to make people accept what is, and perhaps to make it a little better.

This is not only conservative, it is complacent.

It is not anything new.

It has been going on for a long time in this country and perhaps that is why so many really notable and original men who have changed the course of events in one way or another have either not attended college or have done badly there or have flunked out.

It is hard for the adventurous to adventure in most colleges today, but it is easy for the conformist to conform.



What should education be?

First of all, it cannot be defensive; it must be aggressive.

Education for national defense will not produce either good education or good defense; if it is good education, it will not be directly applicable to defense and, if it is directly applicable to defense, it will not be education, but training.

Education is intended to do two things:

first, to teach a body of material and to make it clear that this body of material is not all the material there is, indeed that we do not know what all the material is;

second, to form in the student the habit of thinking systematically about known things and of speculating systematically about unknown things.

Going from the known to the unknown is a probing, prying, questioning process:

Is this statement true?

If it is true, is what it describes good?

If it is good, is there anything better?

The well-educated man is not well adjusted;

he is not comfortable;

he is not safe;

he is not conservative;

he is not defensive;

he may not even be constructive;

probably he is not very happy.

Why, then, do we tolerate this kind of education on those rare occasions when it exists?

Probably because we do not recognize it.

Its results may be disrespectful, annoying, iconoclastic.

Why do we not once again give Socrates the cup of hemlock,

or crucify once again Him who struck at the very basis

of established society and belief,

or burn the heretic at the stake again,

or put the social democrat in the gas chamber,

or brainwash the deviationist?

Why do we not do these things?

We do -- a little bit of them every day.

Anyone who questions the established order is likely to be called a Communist;

indeed, he is likely to be called a Communist if he does not go anywhere near that far, but merely questions the procedure of some people who proclaim themselves to be

"fighting Communism."



Men who believe in the literal interpretation of the Constitution and try to see that it is carried out are likely to be called the "dupes of Communists." We call people we don't quite understand "eggheads" or "longhairs," thus indicating that some intellectuals are bald while others need a haircut. Every time we use one of these contemptuous phrases we damage the mind of America.

Why do we do this?

It is quite reasonable that we should: nothing is more irritating than to have accepted things questioned, to have the boat rocked, to have respected people exposed as not too respectable.

What is the educated man?

First of all, he knows a great deal and he knows that he must continue to learn a great deal. In short, he knows that his knowledge is not finite. Second, he questions what he knows; that is, he knows that what he knows may not be so and, in questioning it, he may destroy it. He cannot stop there, for it is not enough to obliterate an old belief; a new understanding must be found and he must then search what he has learned for knowledge and understanding that together will make a new belief.

A few educated people are also creative; they will go further and speculate beyond what they know and beyond what others know.

They will take knowledge and make signposts into the unknown and make hypotheses or educated guesses or even the "ecstatic leap" into the unknown that the greatest of our creative intellects make.

Then, having made an hypothesis or a guess or a leap, they will search for evidence to demonstrate whether it is so or whether it is not.

The educated person has a conscience.

He is not satisfied with knowing things; he must examine the relative goodness of things.

He knows that he has an obligation to make himself and his learning of some use.

The results of all this are obvious on the lowest level of which we are talking today.

The student comes to college and at once he comes into contact very forcibly with people who know things he has not even imagined and who believe things that are different from what he believes.



Some thoughtless students put aside all they believe and accept whatever is fashionable. Sometimes they disintegrate in the process. But the thoughtful student examines the beliefs he brought with him and, unless they are very well built, they may collapse.

It does not bother us very much when this happens to the notions that the student brought with him about physics, for example, for most of us are not yet aware that physics is a part of our lives.

It matters a good deal when a student's carefully nurtured beliefs about religion collapse and it matters a good deal when his accepted beliefs about politics fall apart.

This is why political science is not a popular subject in Russian universities.

The fact of the matter is that no student in any good college is likely to leave with the same beliefs he brought.

If the college is only pretty good, he may leave with no beliefs or negative beliefs.

If it is good, he will build newer and stronger beliefs upon the old and new knowledge that he brought with him and acquired and has verified.

If both he and the college are very good indeed, he will continue to test his beliefs with each new piece of knowledge.

He will not fit his knowledge into beliefs, as so many of us have done until our beliefs are overgrown by a mass of irrelevant excrescences like the barnacles on a ship's bottom, but he will rather shape his beliefs to his knowledge, constantly comparing what he believes with what he knows.

Then he will be a very troublesome fellow indeed, for this attitude is dangerous to everything that is accepted unthinkingly.

The educated person may be dangerous on a small scale to the established routines of a company or, on a larger scale, to the unthinking mores of a community and the comfortable assumption that what is should be; or, on a still larger scale, he may have an effect on the politics and political beliefs of his community.

Here he may merely upset accepted arrangements of patronage and the like or he may discover that the accepted interpretation of our Constitution is incorrect.

This we all know has been done many times.

Or he may probe so deeply that he upsets the very bases of society.

Then he is a revolutionary, like those dangerous radicals who wrote the Constitution of the United States and who found reason to believe that the people and not the monarch are sovereign and that society is organized for the benefit of the people, so that they may pursue their life, liberty, and happiness, rather than for the convenience of the monarch.



In religion he may alter his own views, thus upsetting his family, or he may strike at the whole corpus of accepted secondary belief and peel it off, going back to the original essentials, as the neo-orthodox have done. Or he may first appear to be a conservative reformer, as Jesus must have seemed to the Jews who first met him; then as a dangerous radical who struck at the ruling classes; and finally as the founder of a new religion, a very dangerous person indeed.

If he is a scientist, he may only learn a little more about what is knowable in the present frame of reference; he will be a useful scientist, but not an important one. Yet he may open up a whole new field by following the leads of what is known to what is not, or he may set a whole new hypothesis to interpret the basic things of science, as Einstein did.

He may someday find the secret of life, though no one has yet, but some have surely found the way for civilization to die, and perhaps it will.

So do not think of education as safe and conservative; it is an ever present danger, but it is also an ever present hope for better things.

Now let us define its sphere.

Education itself is relevant only to individuals -- not for defense, not for democracy, not for free enterprise or Christianity or Communism, but for individuals -- so that they may reach their fullest development and thus be most useful or perhaps, sadly, most destructive.

The individual who receives it fully will seek the truth; in his search he may strengthen or destroy many of the things we love or hate.

Or he may simply decide to serve or attack any one of a body of institutions or beliefs.

Do not forget that the educated person may subsequently be trained to do something specific or indoctrinated to believe something specific, though his capacity to accept indoctrination decreases as his education increases.

Educated people may find for us a whole new life or they may destroy the life we know.

This is the chance that we must take and it is well worth the taking.

This is the awful responsibility of the educator who knows as he works that he may help create, that he may help destroy, that what he does may be for the good or for the bad.

The educator must first sow the dangerous seed of criticism, watch old beliefs fall away.

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Then if he has a conscience -- as he must have -- he must not let his pupil stop in the middle of a vacuum, for, if he does, he has failed him terribly; he must lead his pupil to go on to build, but he can never know until it is done whether what he builds will be good or will be bad.

A university that is serving its purpose well is a very hard thing to live with, for in their inquiries the faculty and the students may turn light on things that you wish to leave in darkness; they will stir the water; they will rock the boat.

A weak college is a very easy thing to live with, for the students are occupied only with the normal disorders of youth; they do not strike at fundamental things, for they do not think about them.

Caesar dislikes Cassius' "lean and hungry look"; but this is not why he fears him; the dictator fears Cassius because "he thinks too much: such men are dangerous."

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